

In discussing the platform of Collective Action some individuals have expressed confusion at our use of the label "specifism" to describe the tradition of social anarchism we associate with. The following is a short introduction to what we consider to be the most essential concepts within the specifist model.



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Specifism Explained

The Social and Political Level, Organisational
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Specifism Explained:

The Social and Political Level, Organisational Dualism and the Anarchist Organisation

★ Collective Action ★

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build coherency. We do not want to compete with other organisations, but refocus our efforts. We are a space for anarchist communists to address their ideas collectively and to build those ideas into a coherent strategy that is grounded in common struggle and united by the robustness of theory.

At present we collate our ideas and discussions on our blog and through our website, which will be published periodically in our journal Ninth Symphony. Our aim, through this, is to publish materials that emerge as relevant and meaningful to the anarchist movement within the context of our existing activity as organisers and militants.

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From: <http://libcom.org/blog/where-we-stand-formation-new-anarchist-communist-project-uk-01052012>

Collective Action has been formed by a group of anarchist communists seeking to understand and resolve the issues facing the anarchist movement and the working class. Having lost confidence in the current formation of the anarchist movement, we felt it necessary to regroup and rekindle our political ideas and activity in the context of forming a wider analysis of the current situation. At the present time we consider ourselves to be a movement orientated association with a focus on critically assessing our failings and the nature of future struggle. However, we aim to actively participate in current struggles with the long term objective of building towards the recreation of a relevant and viable anarchist movement that is able to insert itself into social struggles, winning the leadership of ideas and fostering the cultures of resistance. We believe that this process of regroupment is essential to that objective.

We identify anarchist communism as a political current with its roots in the federalist, anti-authoritarian sections of the First International. This has been a global tradition present in the revolutions and social upheavals of the past century. In contemporary terms we believe this particular tradition to be best represented by the specifist conception of social anarchism. This is a conception of anarchism with which we actively identify. Specifism can be summarised as:

- ★ The need for specifically anarchist organisation built around a unity of ideas and praxis.
- ★ The use of the specifically anarchist organization to theorise and develop strategic political and organisational work.
- ★ Active participation in and building of autonomous and popular social movements via involvement and influence (“social insertion”)

We consider an important aspect of specifism to be the idea of “recapturing the social vector of anarchism,” i.e. re-inserting anarchism as a current of popular organisation within social struggles.

We do not believe that specifism provides complete answers to the problems raised above; we do believe that it is a method and tradition that helps us to address and understand them more clearly (as well as being true to the original vision of social anarchism).

This is a call out to all independent anarchist communists who feel the need to understand more concretely who we are, where we are and how we move forward. While the association encourages people to join it and participate in this process of regroupment, our project is not about quantity, it is about quality. We do not aim to build membership, we aim to

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us to ignore both the conservative and privileged nature of certain sections of the workers' movement as significant barriers to this goal. A minority of organised workers seek to defend concessions in secure employment, which in contrast to the majority of the working class is a particularly privileged position. Precarious workers, students, the unemployed and their communities have displayed in the last year a distinct sympathy towards anti-authoritarian methods and have sought to push a momentum towards offensive direct action. At the same time there has been an acute lack of political foresight, despite the breeding ground for widespread radicalisation. This has been a failure of the anarchist movement to capitalise on this moment and use these battle grounds as a framework to build on this distinct anarchist tradition and insert revolutionary anarchist ideas. This is an area in which we have fought before - the intransigent revolts of the underclass in Montmartre in the 1890s, the counter-cultures of Barcelona's "Barrio Chino" of the 1930s and the rallying call of the Wobblies to abandon the conservative AFL and act as a pole for the excluded, abandoned and unorganised - it is an area in which we must fight again.

Collective Action: an Association of Anarchist Communists

"If the revolutionary lacks the guiding idea of their action, they will not be anything other than a ship without a compass."

- Ricardo Flores Magón

"We also ask for discipline, because, without understanding, without co-ordinating the efforts of each one to a common and simultaneous action, victory is not physically possible. But discipline should not be a servile discipline, a blind devotion to leaders, an obedience to the one who always says not to interfere. Revolutionary discipline is consistent with the ideas accepted, fidelity to commitments assumed, it is to feel obliged to share the work and the risks with struggle comrades."

- Errico Malatesta

lead us to question the wisdom of this analysis - do we want it to get that bad? Such a view ignores the sustained, politicised resistance that Greece, for example, has retained throughout the 1980s/90s, the combative nature of social struggles, a record of concessions won from the state (particularly amongst the students and youth) and a growing anarchist/anti-authoritarian movement that is active, visible and engaged with the communities in almost every urban centre throughout the country.

Our only glimmer of hope, in these years of austerity, has been in the brief but bright struggles of the youth and students. Only here was it possible to see the successful meeting of two cultures - of political militants and organisers (anti-militarists, anti-war campaigners and others politicised through Iraq) and the creativity and combativeness of a generation shut off from the comfortable futures of even their older siblings. By March 26th, when the TUC called its "Rally for the Alternative" in London, it had already become clear how isolated this demographic truly was, as direct action was taking place on Oxford Street thousands of trade unionists watched Ed Miliband in Hyde Park, a pro-austerity politician, play to the crowd.

Unfortunately, a lack of ambition is not just something endemic within the traditional Marxist left. The anarchist movement has also failed to make a significant mark on resistance to austerity, as well as building momentum towards a general acceptance of anarchist ideas and methods. Historically the anarchist movement has shown itself to be distinct from the left, but in recent years - throughout the UK - it has failed to promote the richness of anarchist tradition and history or separate itself from the inertia of the traditional left, becoming nothing more than an appendage to it, content with fulfilling a propagandist role, or at times acting as the more militant wing of the austerity movement when required.

The building blocks of an autonomous counter-power must consist first and foremost of an attack on the myths of austerity and class compromise and the building of confidence in self-organisation and direct action.

Where anarchists have been successful in the past they have been vibrant and integrated parts of working class communities. This means abandoning the terrain of both activism and the Left, and finding ways to speak to the experiences of, and more importantly finding ways of organising within those sections of our community who have, in many cases, already made the critical step of seeing through the illusions of representative democracy but still remain disconnected from politics.

Ultimately the objective of an autonomous and self-organising workers' movement is to build unity. Such an aspiration, however, should not lead



In discussing the platform of Collective Action some individuals have expressed confusion at our use of the label "specifism" to describe the tradition of social anarchism we associate with. The following is a short introduction to what we consider to be the most essential concepts within the specifist model. This text is an adaptation of a forthcoming interview with Shift Magazine on anti-capitalist regroupment.

"Specifism" refers to an organisationalist current within the anarchist tradition which, in contemporary terms, is principally elaborated by the *Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro* (FARJ) but has its historical roots in the writings of Bakunin, Malatesta and Makhno (among others). Many associate these ideas solely with Makhno's "*Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft)*" but they actually date from one of the first organisational documents of social anarchism - Bakunin's programme for the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy. At the core of the specifist framework is an understanding of the division of anarchist activity into the **social** and **political** level.¹ Specifists argue that a lot of the organisational errors of anarchist militants result from a confusion of the social and political level.

The social level is understood as those struggles that exist within the material and ideological framework of capitalism (bread-and-butter issues in layman terms). These will be heavily determined by the ideology of capitalist society and situated principally within the logic of capitalism, for example the demand for increased wages in exchange for labour or the desire for social reforms from the state. These will also be structured by a wider cultural, economic and political framework that will both shape their character, as well as causing their level of combativity and consciousness to ebb and flow, one example being the way in which the ongoing

financial crisis has provoked an acceleration of working class resistance in certain sectors and geographical areas. Anarchists need to find a way of engaging with these struggles in a way that relates directly to the existing composition and level of consciousness present within the class. Successful engagement requires both a relationship of study, in terms of the need to understand and critically evaluate the existing composition and ideas of the class, and a relationship of intervention, to practically shape anarchist ideas and methods so they appear as sensible and useful tools for those engaged at the social level.

Anarchists also need to maintain their own coherent vision of an alternative society - anarchist communism. This is the political level. The political level represents the idea (theory) expressed by revolutionary minorities as visions for social transformation and alternative societies. This political line is obviously not static and exists relationally to the social level. The political level cannot be purely the expression of propaganda of the ideal. Anarchist communism is a tradition developed from the lessons drawn from the struggles of the popular classes. Work at the political level is cultivated through the study, self-criticism and organisational activity of anarchist communist militants and expressed through the unity and organisational discipline of the specific anarchist organisation (SAO). While the social level acts at as the “compass”, as Magon puts it, that steers the theory of revolutionary militants, the political level is also distinct from the social level in that the ideas here are held irrespective of the general social framework and therefore not subject to the mediations of capitalism and the state. The political level, therefore, while expressing clarity in revolutionary ideas does this in the form of minority organisations that are independent and not representative of those held by the class-as-a-whole.

What results from this understanding of the political and social levels is the practice of “organisational dualism”. Specifically anarchist groups (hence the term “specifism”) with well defined positions of principle and operating under conditions of political unity at the political level intervene, participate within or seek to build popular movements at the social level. The objective of this intervention is not to “capture” or establish anarchist fronts but to create the correct conditions, by arguing for anarchist methods and ideas, for the flourishing of working class autonomy. It is this autonomy that is the basis for working class counter-power and revolutionary change, as Malatesta (1897) famously stated, “*We anarchists do not want to emancipate the people; we want the people to emancipate themselves*”.

unorganised and casualised, or soon to be unorganised and casualised. This is while a traditional revolutionary ‘left’ movement has essentially embraced a position of defence and retreat, cuing the outdated appeal to its standard yet dwindling constituents. The anti-austerity movement seems content to seek only a defence of the concessions won by older generations, rather than using the economic crisis and a renewed interest in radical ideas as a means to agitate and fight for a fundamentally different society. In the various regional anti-austerity groups, the authoritarian Marxist left and trade unions have entrenched themselves in petty squabbles over either bureaucratic union organising - in unions that have become increasingly conciliatory towards the coalition government - or what level of support they should offer to the Labour Party, in some cases providing them with a platform at organisational meetings and rallies.

The reality is that the existing repertoires of the Left do not speak to the challenges the working class are facing or indeed with the experiences of the majority of working class people, focusing primarily on the minority of organised workers in privileged economic positions, namely employed, contracted or salaried, non-precarious unionised workers. These mediocre organising efforts have been complimented by reformist struggles such as the anti-tax avoidance campaigns, anti-workfare campaign, which lacks a focused analysis of the nature of work. Initiatives such as Occupy, although at least providing a base for opening the debate on austerity, equally lack direction and focus or a clear understanding of the nature and cause of the attacks. Admittedly the occupation movements in other countries have shown signs of radical transformation, but in the UK most organising efforts have been couched in a social democratic framework aimed at achieving nothing more than a defence of concessions and in some instances actually criticising offensive efforts to fight austerity in the context of anti-capitalism.

The models of activism that the Left rely upon are still tied to the mass struggles of the 1970s/80s - mass rallies, pamphleteering and paper sales, manoeuvring within political meetings. Yet years of Neo-Liberal reform since then have manufactured a working class that is de-politicised, demobilised and individualised. What is required in this instance is not intervention, but reconstruction. The Left are still seeking to lead and direct a mass of workers that, to put it simply, does not exist at this time. Some radicals may look longingly at the resistance in Greece, Spain and other parts of Europe and, falling back on classical Marxist economism, argue that it must get substantially worse to get better. Although the simultaneous rise in “political suicides” in these countries should at the very least

May Day Statement of Collective Action

Here we outline our analysis of the problems facing the anarchist movement in the UK and offer a call out to all independent anarchist communists to participate in our project to re-visit our political tradition, re-group and re-kindle our political action.

“I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and censure.”

- Mikhail Bakunin

The contemporary anarchist movement throughout the UK, and indeed around the world, faces unique challenges.

This generation is faced with crippling austerity measures begun by the former Labour government and now accelerated by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. The economic crisis has provided political elites with a practical justification for ideologically motivated attacks on the working class. Efforts to “bring down the deficit” at all costs have provided the state with the necessary camouflage to manoeuvre into savage Thatcherite cuts to the public sector, education and social welfare, while also creating an incremental process of privatisation of the National Health Service, greater tax breaks for millionaires, tax cuts for businesses, as well as strengthening attacks on workplace organising rights. All of this in an effort to stimulate an economy that continues to stagnate, largely at the expense of increased poverty and mass unemployment, affecting most seriously women, the young and people of colour.

The stark realities of this situation are compounded by the fact that working life for British people is increasingly in economic sectors that are

As the *Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici* (FdCA) (2005) argue, work at the social level should not be a carbon copy of the organisations of the political level. Intervention at the social level has to arise within the context of the immediate needs of the proletariat and their current state of ideological and technical composition. In this sense work at the social level intervenes within and aims to accelerate the process of, as Marx expressed it, the class acting “in itself”, subject to a common condition under capitalism, towards a class-for-itself, a self-conscious grouping acting to its own material interests – communism.

Specifism is a praxis that seeks to strike the balance between a healthy relationship of influence within the class and an ideologically coherent communist organisation, while rejecting the vanguardist approaches of Leninist groups. Whereas Marxists will traditionally look to the fluctuating struggles of the social level and argue the need for a revolutionary leadership *from without*, specifists argue that anarchist communists fight by acting as a critical conscience *from within*.

For this reason specifism is fundamentally organisationalist in character rejecting the idea that anarchism can be developed purely through the propagandistic activity of discussion circles, groups or federations. Rather the SAO needs to form unified tactics and a strategy as the basis of its programme that it carries through in its activity within the class.

Specifism represents both an alternative to anarchist activism, which does not compose itself formally at the political level, and certain models of anarcho-syndicalism, which attempt to unify the practice of the social and political level in the formation of revolutionary unions.

In criticism of anarchist activism, specifists stress the need for an educated and self-critical practice at the political level to build sustainable long-term interventions at the social level. The alternative is sporadic, reactive political work that doesn’t incorporate a cycle of review and re-evaluation. Likewise, as Fabbri notes, the lack of “visible organisations” on the part of anarchist militants, i.e. clear and accessible lines of participation, creates space for the “establishment of arbitrary, less libertarian organisations”.

In response to anarcho-syndicalism, specifists argue that the formation of social-level organisations - unions - with revolutionary principles, does not resolve the problems created by capitalist mediation at the social level. Rather, as the FdCA argue, what result often is, “*a strange mix of mass organisation and political organisation which is basically an organisation of anarchists who set themselves up to do union work*”. This situation usually resolves either in the actual existence of a revolutionary minority

within the union itself that seeks to preserve the line in the face of fluctuations at the social level, often being forced to act undemocratically or necessarily preserving a minority membership for the union, or a flexibility in anarchist principles which leaves open the question of where the radicalisation between the political and social level will occur. Likewise the FARJ make a historical point that the dissolution of anarchist activity into the social level has meant in many cases the complete loss of any political reference point following the collapse or repression of these organisations. The SAO, in this sense, can act as a vital line of continuity for anarchist communist ideas.

Collective Action argues that the lessons and guides derived from specifist theory are a critical tool in the process of anarchist regroupment. The only way there can be a future for anarchist politics in the UK in the 21st Century is in making anarchist communist ideas and methods a practical and coherent tool for organising workplaces, intervening in social struggles and empowering working class communities. Anarchism needs to recapture its traditional terrain of organising, what Bakunin referred to as, the “popular classes” and abandon the dead-end of activism. This means a fundamental re-assessment of what we do and what we hope to achieve. It also means returning, as Vaneigem would call it, to the politics of “everyday life”. This means reorientation of our practice to both the social and political level and utilising the richness of our own political tradition to clarify and improve our own organising efforts.

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- Malatesta, E. (1897) “Anarchism and Organisation” Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/malatesta/1897/xx/anarchorg.htm>

Footnote:

1. A certain elasticity must be allowed with these terms and the labels should by no means be considered exclusive. The “social” level, for example, is of course at the same time “political” in that it is a sphere for both the contestation and birth of ideas. Likewise the “political” level is simultaneously “social” in respect to the fact that anarchist communist ideas are derived from a historical and materialist analysis of society, and composed of the experiences and lessons of social struggle (for more commentary on the historical materialist character of anarchist communism see “Appendix 1: Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism” In: Federazione dei Communisti Anarchici (2005) *Anarchist Communists: A Question of Class*. Studies for a Libertarian Alternative: FdCA).

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